

# **A Year of Angels**

**Presented to Kehillat Kol Sasson**

**Rosh Hashana, 5767**

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In the days just before the Allies liberated Auschwitz, there was mass confusion, and with the crematoria no longer operational, the Nazis began beating and shooting Jews indiscriminately. Amidst the chaos, the inmates sought out refuge wherever they could, clinging to life no matter how desperate the circumstances. And among them a young girl and her little brother, descended into the septic system of the camp. The filth and stench were awful, but they had no choice, there was no other place for them to hide. The two children were frightened and repulsed and to keep their sanity they began to sing quietly. Standing in filth to their waists, they held hands and sang songs, the songs they used to sing around their Sabbath table in another life. Then, a strange thing happened. As the two of them sang “Shalom Aleichem, Malachei Hasharet, Malachei Elyon,” other children heard their voices and one by one climbed into the sewer. And soon, a half-dozen cold, hungry, determined boys and girls stood together in the mess, holding hands, singing the song that welcomes the angels to the Sabbath meal. They stayed there for a long while, holding hands and singing, until the Allied soldiers found them.

I remembered this story when I was studying the Torah portion for this morning, trying for the umpteenth time in my life to put some sense to the Akeidah. The Akeidah seems to be just about God and Avraham, with all of the other characters—Yitzchak, Sarah, the Angel, the ram—passive, accepting, chips in a high-stake, no limit game.

Hashem issues an incredible command:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרָיִם אֵלֶּה 1 And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Avraham, and said to him: 'Avraham'; and Avraham said: 'Here I am.'

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים 2 And God said: 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go into the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of.'

So here, seemingly, we have it: the Akeidah is simply about another test for Avraham. God's final attempt to challenge the depths of his conviction. And will Avraham obey such an awful command? Who can contemplate the disastrous consequences that might have ensued, had Avraham faltered?

But not our Avraham. What faith. What unshakable, unquestioning, unfathomable faith. Momentous faith. Mystic faith. Merciless faith. This giant of a man, who could not stand to see the suffering of the evil citizens of S'dom, who had the chutzpah to challenge God on their behalf. This Avraham, father of us all, did not utter a single word of protest to try to save the son he loved. Yes, Avraham was faithful to God, but this faithfulness came at the expense of faithfulness to his son. It is up to an angel to stay Avraham's hand even as the blade of his knife lay cold and menacing against Yitzchak's throat. It is up to an angel to speak in God's name.

וַיִּשְׂרֹף אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדָיו וְאֶת-כַּף-אָזְנוֹ וְאֶת-כַּף-רַגְלוֹ וְאֶת-כַּף-רַגְלוֹ וְאֶת-כַּף-רַגְלוֹ וְאֶת-כַּף-רַגְלוֹ  
 10 And Avraham stretched forth his  
 hand, and took the knife to slay his  
 son.

וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָכְיוֹ אֶת-אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם  
 11 And the angel of the LORD called  
 to him out of heaven, and said:  
 'Avraham, Avraham.' And Avraham  
 said: 'Here I am.'

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַלְאָכְיוֹ אַל-תִּשָּׂא יָדְךָ עַל-בְּנִי וְעַל-אֶתְמוֹתָיו וְעַל-אֶתְמוֹתָיו וְעַל-אֶתְמוֹתָיו  
 12 And the angel said: 'Do not lay not  
 your hand upon the lad, neither  
 should you do any thing to him; for  
 now I know that you are a God-  
 fearing man, seeing you have not  
 withheld your son, your only son,  
 from Me.'

We need angels in this world. This is the connection between the Auschwitz story and the Akeidah. God is always watching over us, of course, and to the extent angels exist they are only his proxies. But God's world, a world in which a father may be asked to commit an unthinkable act to prove his faith, a world in which Jewish children may be forced to hide in a sewer to save their lives, is a place where sometimes it is better to have an intermediary between the mortal and divine. Far better that an angel saves us in our time of need than God Himself. Were we to have a direct connection to the "Saving God," it might make us feel that we had the right to question the "Incomprehensible God." The God responsible for the circumstances from which we need to be saved.

The Talmud tells us that every angel has only one mission, and that an angel's mission is synonymous with its name. Rafael: God Heals, Michael: Who is Like God, Gavriel: God is my strength. Which angel saved Yitzchak? Which angel saved the surviving children of Auschwitz? It doesn't matter. It is enough to know that they were ready to intervene when God gave the word.

I want to finish by sharing a prayer with you that you will not find in your Artscroll or Birnbaum. It was written by a 19-year-old poet named Liron Harpaz, and each word is redolent with the hopes and expectations of a vibrant youth, a young woman in love. A corporal in the IDF, Liron spent her military service helping underprivileged children in a special unit of Student Teachers. During her army service she was singled out as the most accomplished cadet in her class. An extraordinary daughter of Israel.

On October 2, 2001, Liron Harpaz and Assaf Yitzhaki, the boy she loved, were murdered by Palestinian terrorists who infiltrated the village of Alei Sinai. After her funeral, Liron's parents, Etty and Arik, found a notebook in which their daughter had written over 100 poems, poems that exhibit a sense of maturity far exceeding her tender age, poems in which she discusses her own mortality, almost as if she were imbued with the power of prophecy. This poem—her prayer—she called, *I Have a Day of Joy*.

I have a day of joy  
I have a limitless day  
Give me a day with no ending,  
Give me a day filled with fantasy  
Give me a smile when the battle ends  
Caress me after the curtain has been shut

I have a day of joy  
With no more barricades left to crush  
Let the flower blossom, the leaf turn green  
Let the grass grow  
And the sun shine from afar  
Let me have one news-less day  
A day with no catastrophes  
And award me one tiny smile  
Before we all fall asleep

I have a day of joy  
An everyday that turned into a dream

Grant me such a day and make time stand still  
Leave me in yesterday  
And award me one tiny smile before we all fall asleep

Liron's name means "I have joy" and on this Rosh Hashana I would like to believe that she is in the celestial chambers, dipping slices of apple in honey with Rafael, Michael, Gavriel, and the other angels. I would like to believe that she is watching all of us, ready to extend her delicate hand when Hashem looks her way. I would like to believe that the limitless joy she speaks of in her prayer can find its way into the crevices of our lives, filling us with hope to take on the uncertain future.

On this Rosh Hashana, let us pray to aspire to the faith of Avraham, and the joy of the Angel Liron. Let us pray for a year filled with angels.